

6.10 Air tour

6.10.1 Resource Assessment

Description

The Air Tour Product is associated with scenic touring as well as providing access to and opportunities for mountain biking, paragliding, hiking, skiing and fishing. It utilizes the diversity of helicopters and the affordability of fixed wing aircraft. It has two components:

- An *air tour* allows tourists an opportunity to view surrounding landscapes while experiencing flying. The tours are best limited to an hour for most passengers, for reasons of comfort. Dramatic landscapes or diverse features are essential.
- The *air access tour* contains an air tour component but it is primarily to get recreationists to where they want to be. The turn around time from the base to the delivery area should be done within the shortest time possible. It is most suited for the helicopter. The access tour can deliver fishermen to the best fishing hole and, if need be, instantly transfer them to another hole. Mountain bikers and hikers can be delivered to the summit to enjoy the alpine/subalpine ridges and can be picked up or may return by trail. They may take a picnic lunch. Heli-skiing and paragliding activities require drop off at the summit of pristine snowfields, pickup at the base of the hill and then a drop off once again at the summit. The access tour is most profitable where the features are within a 15 minute flight of the base camp or airfield.

To determine the relationship of the features to the base camp or airfield the following criteria were identified:

- air tour operators must be diversified between tourism and industrial use in order to remain viable;
- an air tour product should not take longer than one hour and at average speeds of up to 150 km per hour, a 60 km radius from the center is optimal for circle tours; and,
- the greatest and most profitable opportunities lie where the features are closest to the base camp or airfield.

Table 6.10-1: Region SWOT Analysis for Air Tour

Strength	Scenic recreation features suitable for air tour. Suitable activity opportunities close to staging areas.
Weakness	High precipitation and inclement weather. Remoteness from population centers and cost to get to the staging areas. Lack of supportive infrastructure. Wildlife are incidental and air touring may disturb those in visible areas. Environmental concerns with activities utilizing air access to subalpine/alpine ridges.
Opportunity	Expanding on existing opportunities (such as freshwater fishing), complimenting the road and marine tour products, growth of heli-skiing industry in BC
Threats	Land use uncertainties, lack of community support, declining industrial base.

Air Tours and the Mid Coast

The Mid Coast has geographical features well suited for the air tour product. The rugged coastline, dramatic peaks of the coastal mountains, the steep fiords, the scattered lakes, rivers, the immense icefields and overall scenery provide a tour with a variety of scenic experiences. Certain staging areas (communities, base camp or airfield) are closer to the coastal geography, while others are better associated with the high country. To best determine the relationship of the features to the staging area, a 60 km¹ radius was drawn on the map around several chosen staging areas. The staging areas were determined by their ability to attract tourists, their close linkage to industrial opportunities and availability of required infrastructures. The following discussion identifies the **staging areas** and links the recreation resources within a 60 km range.

- *Klemtu*: Air tours originating in Klemtu can provide a circle tour of the scenic Inside Passage, Anchor/Canoon Lakes, Laredo Inlet and the outer coast. This tour would provide a variety of scenic landscapes, from steep rock cliffs to rolling lake and bog pocketed coast. Heli-fishing access can be linked to the lakes and the small river and creeks of Roderick and Princess Royal Islands and mainland section.
- *Bella Bella/ Shearwater/ Denny Island*: Air tours from here can be linked to the coastal areas and can include a trip to Roscoe Inlet, Ellerslie Lake, Spiller, Bullock and Troupe passage. Heli-fishing access can be linked to the lakes and the small river rivers and creeks of Roderick and the mainland section extending from Spiller Channel south to include, among others, the Koeye and Clayak Rivers.
- *Rivers Inlet Fishing Lodges/ Dawsons Landing*: Air tours can be linked to the coastal areas and Cape Caution. Heli-fishing access provided on the small river rivers and creeks of mainland extending from Koeye to the north and the Kilbella, Chuckwalla to the Oweekeno watershed to the east.
- *Oweekeno*: Air tours can be linked to Owikeno Lake, coastal areas and Cape Caution. Heli-fishing access can be the small rivers and creeks of mainland extending from Koeye to the north and the Kilbella, Chuckwalla to the Oweekeno watershed to the east. A hiking/picnicking opportunity may be linked to Sheewahant Hotspring. The steep logging roads in a number of the watersheds may be suitable for mountain biking.
- *Ocean Falls*: An air tour can access the headwaters of the Kitlope River, the scenic Burke and Dean Channels, Roscoe Inlet and sections of the outer coast. Heli-fishing access can be linked to the lakes and the small river rivers and creeks of Roderick and the mainland section extending from Spiller Channel south to include among others, the Koeye and Clayak Rivers.
- *Bella Coola/Hagensborg*: The glacier / waterfall tour that include Hunlen Falls, Turner Lake Chain and the Monarch Icefield is dramatic and the premiere choice for tours in the District. There are opportunities for touring the Dean Channel and circling back over the peaks to Bella Coola. Fishing tours can include the Dean, Noieck, Taleomy, Tsea, and Washwash Rivers. Hiking and mountain biking tours can be linked to the trails and logging roads in the mountain surrounding the Bella Coola Valley. Paragliding access tours can provide quick dropoff onto the ridges surrounding Bella Coola. The Turner Lake Chain in Tweedsmuir Provincial Park falls within the 60 km radius and campers and canoeists can be dropped off/picked up here. There appear to be good opportunities for heli-skiing in the coastal mountain range – at least one operator is presently interested in developing this opportunity.

¹ The assumption is that a one hour flight would travel no more than 120 km.

Wildlife viewing on the Mid Coast is limited. Although present, the wildlife are may not be consistently viewed and where there is an opportunity for viewing, the chances to disturb the wildlife is great and must be strictly considered.

6.10.2 Market, Economic and Social Assessment of Air Touring

Competition

There are six air transportation companies that are either based on the Mid Coast, or have operations there. Three of the companies – Bella Coola Air, Pacific Coastal Airlines and Sharp Wings – are fixed wing air charters. The other three – Rainbow West, Vancouver Island and West Coast Helicopters – are helicopter charters. All of these companies diversify their services among industrial use, general transportation, emergency use and tourism. Tourism business is concentrated throughout the summer months, and generally has two components:

- transporting sportsfishers to the various lodges of the Mid Coast; and,
- “walk in” business seeking an air tour of the area, or specific sites.

A large proportion of helicopter tourist travel is comprised of fishers destined for the Dean Channel, where the landing strip is now out of commission, rendering it unsuitable for fixed wing aircraft. Fixed wing tours cost approximately \$220 per hour, while helicopter tours range in price from \$320 to \$450 for a 20 minute ride (4 or 6 seat craft).²

It is our understanding that the air charter industry is competitive, especially during times of downturn in the forest industry.

Market Assessment

Air tours can be categorized as a soft adventure product, appealing largely to people interested in sightseeing, nature observation and wildlife viewing. Nature observation and wildlife viewing are increasingly popular activities in Canada and North America, and can be found wherever there is unique scenery or the opportunity to link with other products. It is not always possible, however, to view wildlife from the air, although operators can fly over known seal colonies or locations frequented by whales at certain times of the year.

Sportsfishers comprise a large share of tourism air travel to the Mid Coast during the summer months – one operator indicates that this is almost half of their summer business, with air tour clientele comprising another 10 to 15 percent of summer tourism travel. Another Mid Coast operator indicates that total tourism business (sportsfishers and others) makes up a total of 10 to 15 percent of their business. The market for sportsfishers and those seeking air tours are highly different. Sportsfishers generally book ahead and travel directly to the

² These rates are as of March 2001, and are subject to change.

lodges with little or no stayover elsewhere on the Mid Coast, while “walk in” clients are drawn to the attractions of the area, or take an air tour as part of their trip through the region.

Those seeking a scenic tour often learn about the air tour companies through brochures obtained on the ferry, at hotels or at tourist information centres. Another effective marketing technique to attract clientele on good days (although we do not know if it used on the Mid Coast) is to display sandwich boards advertising charter services at the ferry terminals. This component of the tourism market is highly weather-dependent. The variability of weather makes it difficult to plan trips in advance, and so operators generally take same-day bookings during the summer. As one local air charter operator says, “We don’t take them out unless we are pretty damned sure they will enjoy their trip”.

The market for air tours varies depending on where in BC the air tour operation is based. One operator on the Mid Coast indicated that many of her customers are American, European (especially German) or Japanese, with considerable disposable income. These clients are generally FIT (free independent travellers), and often couples. In contrast, a tour operator in Squamish who offers helicopter tours of a glacier informed the consultants that there is no particular age or income profile for his clients, who range in age from babies to the elderly. This suggests that those willing to travel longer distances for a northern air tour experience are likely to be older and more affluent. Moreover, a weakened Canadian currency gives international visitors a cost advantage.

The outlook for tourism-based air charter business is positive in BC, however it is a competitive market on the Mid Coast. One air tour operator on the Mid Coast indicates that the market has been growing, and that this trend will continue. Their company’s business doubled last year, and is expected to double again this year, although much of this can be ascribed to the sportsfishing industry. Another operator describes their air tour business as “steady”. There is also potential longer-term growth in providing flying services to heliskiiers. In the winter of 2000, ten skiiers used a local helicopter service to gain access to the local mountains around Bella Coola. This niche has the potential to grow and, with it, the demand for air charter services on a year round basis.

The market for air tours appears to have considerable potential, particularly as the North American and European population ages and as travellers continue to be interested in viewing unique scenery and features in an exciting way.

Land Use and Planning Impacts

Existing Recreation Uses

Air tours are generally compatible with other recreational uses, although recreationists and wildlife on the ground are sensitive to noise from aircraft. Low fly-overs are prohibited in certain provincial and federal parks.

Wildlife Concerns

Increasingly, the use of aircraft for wildlife viewing is discouraged. Wildlife concerns may make helicopter operation impractical or impossible in some areas, likewise landing of aircraft may be prohibited in some park areas.

Other Land Uses

Site specific compatibility may be a concern where the aircraft frequently lands within sight of other recreational users – for example those engaged in wildlife viewing – or where First Nations undertake kelp gathering and other traditional uses

Community Use or Planning

Air tour operations generally fit with the planning goals of most communities.

Employment Impacts

Airplane and helicopter operations employ several workers on a year round basis but only a small share of their work is related to air tours. Given the large capital cost of starting up and operating an air tour business, it is necessary to diversify into other uses, such as charter flights for regional transportation, and to support forestry, mining or fire suppression, in order to operate year round. During the summer months a tour operation will create additional employment for pilots, ground crew, dispatcher, and clerical/booking agent. Most of these positions require a high level of training and skills.

Regulatory or Crown Tenure Requirements

Air tour operators would require a tenure or permit from BC Assets and Land Corporation for a landing site or a dock where they take passengers on. Lakes are presently excluded from this policy. Park use permits are required for provincial parks.

Helicopter operators can and do serve backcountry skiers by flying them to base camp locations, and this does not require a Commercial Recreation tenure. Actual heli-ski operations will require a CR tenure and very likely a guide service.

Level of Community Support

Consultation with specific communities may be required if an operator wants to fly over, or land near, culturally or historically sensitive sites. Unless being developed by the local First Nations, permissions should be obtained from the First Nation in whose traditional territory the operation is being developed. Specific negotiations will be required if infrastructure is to be developed near a site of cultural or historic significance.

Infrastructure Requirements

It is not likely that new aircraft operations would start up on the Mid Coast to serve the tourism market. Instead, existing operations would need to invest in additional up-front costs such as marketing a new image, hiring guides, etc.

General Capital Requirements

Startup costs for an air charter business are high. They include the purchase of a plane or helicopter and establishment of a flight base. Typical helicopter prices range from \$500,000 to \$1.2 million for a 4 seater craft, to \$1.7 million for a 6 seater helicopter. It is unlikely that a tourism operator would be prepared to make an investment of this magnitude, particularly in a market that is already competitive.

Table 6.10-2 analyses each geographical unit using resource, market, economic and social criteria. The rationale for the boundaries of these geographic units is discussed in Section 5.2 of this report. Areas with the highest potential for the Air Tour Product have been identified as *polygons* on the map and are described in Table 6.10-3.



Monarch range: photo by Warren Fox

Table 6.10-2: PRODUCT ANALYSIS TABLE: AIR TOUR

Unit Name/Number		Outer Coast (1)	Fiords & Lakes(2)	Channels (3)	Oweekeno (4)	Mountain and Trade Routes (5)	Princess Royal Island (6)
Resource Criteria							
Uniqueness of Key Features	Setting Naturalness	High	High	High	Medium	High	High
	Dramatic Feature Grouping	Medium	High	Medium	Medium	High	Medium
	Wildlife	Medium	Low	Low	Medium	Medium	Medium
Supportive Resources	Peaks and icefields	Low	High	Medium	Medium	High	Low
	Rock faces	Low	High	High	High	High	High
	Fish Creek / Rivers	High	High	Medium	Medium	Medium	Medium
	Rolling ridges	Low	Low	Low	Low	Medium	Low
Existence of Supportive Infrastructure		Low	Low	Low	Low	Low	Low
Associated Products		Hiking, ski tour, adventure, freshwater fishing, cultural interpretation					
Significance of Associated Products		Medium (fishing)	Medium (fishing)	Low	Low	Medium (adventure, ski tour, hiking)	Medium (fishing)
Access to Staging Areas		High	Medium	Medium	High	High	Medium
Access from Staging Area to Resource		High	High	High	Medium	High	Medium
Prime Season		Spring – Fall	Spring - Fall	Spring - Fall	Spring – Fall	Spring - Fall	Spring – Fall
Resource Discussion		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moderate opportunity with the highest opportunity linked to fishing. - Air tours of the outer coast lacks dramatic features. - Moderate fishing. - Possibilities for whale spotting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High opportunity - This unit has dramatic landscapes and numerous creeks and lakes suitable for fishing. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moderate opportunity - This unit has dramatic landscapes and hot springs but lacks diversity. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Moderate tour opportunity. - Linkage to hot spring. - This unit has dramatic landscapes although sections exhibit timber harvesting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High scenic tour, fish and adventure opportunity - This Monarch Icefields, Hunlen Falls and other significant features within and around the Bella Coola Valley provide the most dramatic landscapes in the Mid Coast. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - High scenic and fish opportunity - This unit has dramatic landscapes and numerous creeks and lakes suitable for fishing.

Mid Coast Tourism Opportunity Strategy

Communities Most Able to Benefit	Bella Bella, Klemtu, Shearwater, Dawsons Landing	Bella Bella, Shearwater, Ocean Falls	Bella Coola, Bella Bella, Ocean Falls, Namu	Dawsons Landing, Oweekeno	Bella Coola	Klemtu, Hartley Bay
----------------------------------	--	--------------------------------------	---	---------------------------	-------------	---------------------

Market, Economic and Social Criteria							
Unit Name/Number	Outer Coast (1)	Fjords & Lakes(2)	Channels (3)	Oweekeno (4)	Mountain and Trade Routes (5)	Princess Royal Island (6)	
Level of Competition	High	High	High	High	High	High	
Market Demand Potential	Medium to high	Medium to high	Medium	Medium to high	Medium to high	Medium to high	
Impact/ Conflict	Existing Recreation Use	- Generally compatible with other uses, although may be noise/visual impacts on other recreationists or wildlife					
	Other Land Uses	- Site specific visual/noise where aircraft lands; possible impact on First Nations traditional use					
	Community Use or Plans	- fits with Heiltsuk plans - Kitasoo: unknown - Oweekeno: unknown	- fits with Heiltsuk plans - Ocean Falls & Kitasoo: unknown	- Heiltsuk: fits with plans	- Oweekeno: unknown	- Bella Coola, Hagensborg: fits with plans - Nuxalk: unknown	- Kitasoo: unknown
	Environmental	- Site specific: low to medium impacts on bear, mountain goats, other wildlife					
Local Employment Impacts	- seasonal employment; generates small number of skilled to highly skilled jobs						
Regulatory or Crown Tenure Requirements	- Air tour operators will require permit or tenure for a landing site or a dock where they take passengers on.						
Level of Community Support	- Heiltsuk: positive - Kitasoo: unknown	- Heiltsuk: positive - Ocean Falls & Kitasoo: unknown	Heiltsuk: positive	Oweekeno: unknown	- Bella Coola, Hagensborg: positive - Nuxalk: unknown	- Kitasoo: unknown	
Infrastructure Requirements	- Aircraft, landing base, possible docks or landing strips at landing site						
General Capital Requirements	- High						
POLYGONS EXHIBITING HIGHEST POTENTIAL	5	2, 3, 4	8	7	8,9	1	

Refer to Table 6.1-1 for definition of foregoing criteria. See next page for definitions of highest potential polygons.

Table 6.10-3: Descriptions of Highest Potential Polygons for Air Tour Product

Polygon Number	Description of Polygon
1	<p>Focus: Princess Royal Staging Area: Klemtu. This polygon falls within the “Spirit Bear Rainforest”. The tour from Klemtu can link mysterious Laredo Inlet, the high scenic values of Anchor and Canoona Lakes and the scenic Inside Passage (and Khutze Inlet, Green Lagoon). High fishing values in a number of rivers with a focus on Canoona and Anchor Lakes (steelhead). Polygon has a high First Nations significance (Kitasoo). Air tour associated product: Tours, fishing, wildlife viewing, cultural interpretation.</p>
2	<p>Focus: Roderick Island Staging Area: primarily Klemtu , also Ocean Falls, Shearwater, Bella Bella. Many rivers and lakes with high fish presence. Roderick Lake has high scenic values. Air tour associated products: Tours, fishing cultural interpretation.</p>
3	<p>Focus: Fiordland Provincial Park Staging Area: Klemtu. Very scenic area that includes towering rock cliff faces and high snow capped peaks. Air tour associated products: Tours, fishing.</p>
4	<p>Focus: Roscoe and Ellerslie Staging Area: Bella Bella, Shearwater, Ocean Falls, Klemtu. Very scenic areas with lakes and rivers identified as fish bearing. Polygon has very high First Nations significance (Heiltsuk) Air tour associated products: Tours, fishing, cultural interpretation.</p>
5	<p>Focus: Mainland Namu, Koeye to Moses Staging Area: Bella Bella, Shearwater, Ocean Falls, Klemtu. Very scenic areas with lakes and rivers identified as fish bearing. Polygon has very high First Nations significance (Heiltsuk) Air tour associated products: Tours, fishing, cultural interpretation.</p>
6	<p>Focus: Cape Caution and Blundell Bay Staging Area: Bella Bella, Shearwater, Ocean Falls, Klemtu. World Class beach, potential for whale sightings. Air tour associated product: Tours, fishing, cultural interpretation.</p>
7	<p>Focus: Oweekeno Lake Staging Area: Oweekeno Very scenic lake culminating in the Sheemahant Hotspring (presently undeveloped). Fish Bearing rivers and creeks. Air tour associated products: Tours, Destination lodge, fishing, cultural interpretation.</p>
8	<p>Focus: Dean Channel to Kimsquit Staging Area: Primary Bella Coola, Ocean Falls. Scenic fiord that leads to the estuaries of Kimsquit and Dean. Also includes the snow capped peaks of the coast mountains. Air tour associated products: Tours, destination lodge, fishing, cultural interpretation.</p>
9	<p>Focus: Dean Channel to Kimsquit Staging Area: Bella Coola. The scenic Bella Coola Valley to Rainbow Range, Hunlen Falls, Turner Lake chain, coast mountains and the Monarch Glacier. Possibly the most scenic tour in the Study Area. Air tour associated products: Tours, adventure (mountaineering, ski tour, paragliding, downhill mountain biking) and heli-skiing.</p>